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Berger: Ways of Seeing

Ways of Seeing, a book made by John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, and Richard Hollis. New York and London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972. 160 pp., photographs. \$7.95 (cloth), \$2.50 (paper).

Ways of Seeing, four programs produced by BBC-TV, 1972. Sale: \$1170 for set (16mm), \$820 for set (video); Rental: \$325 for set (16mm), \$230 for set (video), \$120 each (16mm), \$35 each (video), from Time-Life Multimedia.

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In 1972, John Berger manufactured (the choice of this term rather than the more conventional options "produced" or "wrote" will become apparent) a book and a series of four BBC films entitled *Ways of Seeing*. With the intellectual inspiration of Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1969), Berger set out to redefine certain modes of analysis in the study of both "unique" and mass-produced images. The idea for the book was apparently conceived as an afterthought.

Ways of Seeing contains seven essays. According to Berger, these may be read in any order. Four of the essays contain words and images. Number 1 is concerned with the rise of new kinds of meanings for images once they have been restructured by the different processes of mechanical reproduction. Number 3 investigates how a type of oil painting, the nude, reflects a culture's political attitudes toward the predominantly female subjects of this genre. Number 5 focuses on an analysis of oil painting as the tacit partner of capitalism, while Number 7 probes the use of images in the hyperrealized world of publicity, or advertising. The remaining three essays, comprised solely of images, are meant to function as wordless dialectical stimuli for the ideas presented in the written text.

Utilizing different media to produce essentially the same content forces one to ask, "How will the visual and verbal content of Berger's productions be altered vis-à-vis the purposive manipulations inherent in the differing formats of each medium?" Berger notes, "It is no longer what . . . [an] image shows that strikes one as unique; its first meaning is no longer to be found in what it says, but what it *is* (p. 21., italics mine)."

Since the issue of the effect of a medium or mode of reproduction on an image is at the heart of Berger's work, one would think that he would evince an awareness of possible differences that might arise in presenting his ideas in a color film or showing reproductions in black and white in a paperback book format. However, such sensibility is not apparent. I shall discuss the book and the four films almost interchangeably, because Berger's lack of reflexive awareness of the different media as vessels of intent is manifested to an equal degree in both mediums.

Berger's forays, for the most part, are centered on a special kind of image, the oil painting. He attempts to investigate the effects that mass reproduction has had on the social uses of these images. His basic contention is: "Today we see the art of the past as nobody saw it before. We actually perceive it in a different way (p. 16)." Using the now familiar argument that the various "ways of seeing" what have been manufactured as images has always been based on the cultural conventions dominant at particular times, he goes one step further. He asserts that the "privilege" of seeing an image correctly has resided in the hands of those curators of esoterica, art historians, whose language of description tends to distance the average participant's access to a meaningful understanding of these images. Why is this linguistic mystification occurring? Berger, in a nickle-Marxian-world stance notes: "In the end, the art of the past is being mystified because a privileged minority is striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the role of the ruling classes, and such a justification can no longer make sense in modern terms (p. 11)."

One of the primary reasons for such an elitist justification no longer making sense was noted by Benjamin some forty years ago. The meaning of an image is no longer chained to its basis in ritual life, in the synchronic elements of its unique production, display, and social use. Instead, meaning has become polysemic in nature as a result of the multiplied possibilities of access and interpretation through varying modes of mechanical reproduction. Benjamin stated: ". . . for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an even greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility (Benjamin 1972:224)."

To Benjamin and Berger, then, the unique value of an original work has now become subject to the fluctuating social values of its differential use and display because of its transportability and reproducibility. Anyone who has affixed Robert Indian's "Love" postage stamp to a letter, or used similar postal reproductions of the works of Harnett and others, can immediately see a single application of Benjamin's insights: *commercium cum ars*.

According to Berger, the meaning of paintings is no longer attached *in situ*. Meanings become transmittable; theoretically, pieces of information can be used by anyone in a variety of ways in differing contexts. Thus, what was once a fairly monolingual "language of painting" has instead become a multidialectical "language of images." Both book and films emphasize that "what matters now is who uses that language for what purpose (p. 33)." Reproduction, by detaching art from a reified "domain of tradition," forces Berger to man the barricades of a politics of art, suggested by Benjamin, and ask, ". . . to whom does the meaning of the art of the past properly belong? To those who can apply it to their own lives, or to a cultural hierarchy of relic specialists (p. 32)." Berger

sees art now floating in an almost endless chain of reproducible images, surrounding us "in the same way as a language surrounds us. They have entered the mainstream of life over which they no longer, in themselves, have power (p. 32)."

For purposes of explication, one might contend that Berger is dealing with four facets of this "language of images" created by mechanical reproduction:

1. Benjamin's aphoristic theories on the significance of the shift from looking at art-as-ritual to an analysis focusing on art-as-politics.

2. The manifestation of this shift evinced in oil painting. Berger feels that oil painting, with its special surface qualities and materials, was best suited to express an almost tangible notion of ownership of material goods and cultural domination. European oil painting is a tradition, to Berger, that functioned primarily as a vanity case convincingly displaying a conqueror's ill-gotten goods.

3. The image of women as seen in a particular tradition of oil painting—the nude.

4. The growth of a "publicity" of visual images (what Americans refer to as "advertising") as a logical extension of the above trends, creating a world where all images are potentially equal bits of information.

It should be noted at the outset that Berger favors an approach that would find him most at home in a Chautauqua tent. He seemingly aims his work at an audience not yet familiar with anything but a sparse outline of one of the kinds of traditionalist approaches to the study of "art" in society. The Augean stables he wishes to clean have always attracted a long list of would-be occupants, many with approaches that merit attention. How then does Berger see his contribution to an already overcrowded field attempting to study the place of mass-produced images in society?

First, Berger's approach is, in the sense defined by Benjamin, "political." He wishes to show both reader and viewer how art has been socially weighted as the property and domain of the monied or power classes, something to dole out to less fortunate beings in the gracious name of a tradition of militant elitist "culture." This attitude has affected both the forms of the criticism and, logically, the access and interest one could obtain in seeking to understand the meanings of images.

Second, Berger calls attention to a notion made familiar by Lévi-Strauss, namely, that art is

... something that was enjoyed by a minority who were using it as an instrument, or means, of private pleasure, much more than it has ever been, or still is, in the so-called primitive societies, where it is a system of communication operating throughout the entire group. [Lévi-Strauss 1969:62]

In his sections on the nude and the European tradition of oil painting, Berger again espouses Lévi-Strauss' idea that ownership and an exploitative sense of treating women in painting (nudes) as special objects of property and pleasure of the owner are the features that characterize Western art, and, more sig-

nificantly, the past ways these images have been studied. Lévi-Strauss notes: "It is this avid and ambitious desire to take possession of the object for the benefit of the owner or even of the spectator which seems to me to constitute one of the outstandingly original features of the art of Western civilization (p. 64)."

One must thank Berger for bringing to our attention the previous limitations and deeper political issues inherent in the study of art and its differential use by the group. As an introduction to what many still feel is a discomfiting way of analyzing "beautiful" images, Berger's insights are invaluable in linking the too often isolated study of worlds within frames to the larger social or political arenas suggested by Benjamin, Jan Mukarovsky, and others.

At the outset of each film, the viewer sees a casually attired John Berger in close-up. The camera moves back, revealing the close-up to be not the recorded image of Berger on film, but the recorded image of Berger on a television monitor now captured on film. If, perchance, this blatant reference to the work and theories of Dziga Vertov is missed, Berger cites from Vertov's manifestoes on the ability of the "camera-eye" to manipulate the spectator into "ways of seeing." Berger offers simplistic history of the extension of traditional codes of visual representation and seeing, from Giotto to the perspective-shattering camera. Although he warns viewers, in the first film, to be sceptical of everything they will hear and see (the book urges, on the last page, that the process of questioning is "to be continued by the reader . . ."), this brief gesture to reflexivity is something less than a full acknowledgment of methods to come. Thus, one of the central tenets of Berger's work—that the viewer should be made aware of how varying modes of reproduction can guide our ways of seeing—is glossed over in both films and book. The often invisible scribes behind the scrim of either medium are blatantly manipulated to seduce the viewer (through the fragmentation of images, adding verbal texts to images, or concealing or distorting images through a choice of lenses on the camera) into Berger's own circumscribed way of seeing. This is a neat trick of the conjurer, removing the 3-D glasses of his audience only to replace them with blinders.

Thus, in his analysis of Gainsborough's *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*, Berger notes that Kenneth Clark's paean to the potential greatness Gainsborough gave up by turning his talent away from landscape (or "direct") painting becomes an entirely different level of analysis. He discusses the painting, which shows a couple (presumably Mr. and Mrs. Andrews) set amidst a rolling landscape:

The point being made is that, among the pleasures their portrait gave to Mr. and Mrs. Andrews, was the pleasure of seeing themselves depicted as landowners and this pleasure was enhanced by the ability of oil paint to render their land in all its substantiality. And this is an observation which needs to be made, precisely because the cultural history we are normally taught pretends that it is an unworthy one. [p. 108]

While Berger is correct in assuming that his level of interpretation is neglected in circles of art criticism, his mode of illustrating the validity of his insights is a mighty piece of the very malleability of a reproduced image that he maintains one should expose. In attempting to demonstrate that Gainsborough's painting is "really" about the arrogance of British landowners, Berger utilizes one of film's inherent properties, the ability to redefine and alter graphic space. Thus, a "No Trespassing" sign is mysteriously superimposed on the tree in the painting. This makes the Andrews appear to be greedy private landowners jealously guarding their private preserve from imminent incursion by nonlanded poachers. In the book, close-ups of the faces of the Andrews, removed from the total context Gainsborough created in his image, are used as visual "evidence" of the arrogance of the landed class hegemony Berger has so aptly introduced in the preceding paragraphs. It is this mechanically manufactured "evidence" now used by Berger which elsewhere in the book (in reference to Hals' *Alms House Regents* and Van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows*) have been cited to bolster a contradictory argument, that "each image reproduced has become part of an argument which has little or nothing to do with the painting's original independent meaning. The words have quoted the paintings to confirm their own verbal authority (p. 28)." Berger's failure to recognize and admit to his own deployment of such a strategy hampers the acceptance of his own remarks, which in light of these discrepancies take on a tone of false piety.

To delve further into Berger's lack of reflexivity is also to note the glosses between film and book. In the book, Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, painted at what Berger might call the very inception of the oil-painting-as-possession trend, can be used here to illustrate the Bergerian method (p. 89). The image is examined in depth and discovered to be a veritable catalog of (then) contemporary manufactured instruments and ornaments which convincingly display the mercantile and military matrices under which both painter and patron operated. The somewhat anomalous elongated skull in the foreground of the image (which could be properly recognizable as a skull with the aid of special mirrors) is noted as historical "memento mori," an artifact from a time and a culture when certain ritual aspects of life demanded homage to the religious ties of the day. In the film, this datum is ignored. The erratic lack of focus makes Berger's book and films tantalizing but incomplete.

For instance, Baxandall's work (1972), published the same year as Berger's, exhibits a deeper awareness of the limitations of the image-as-social-history school of analysis. Baxandall notes:

... the main materials of social history are very restricted in their medium. . . . These cover some kinds of activity and experience repetitively and neglect others. Much of the most important experience cannot conveniently be encoded into words or numbers, as we all know, and therefore does not appear in the documents that exist. . . . It is very difficult to get a notion of what

it was to be a person of a certain kind at a certain time and place. [p. 152]

While Berger's productions are not claimed to be primarily "historical" investigations, he does cast a suspicious eye upon past "ways of seeing" images, arguing their inappropriateness in this age of mechanical reproduction. Yet, at the same time, he interposes himself backward in time, reading from the images precisely what his contemporary "way of seeing" inconsistently demands. This is casuistry, at best.

Certain inconsistencies aside, Berger's approach merits attention. Particularly significant is his discussion of the role a verbal "language of art" might play in a culture. The existence of vocabularies for groups of specialists has been noted as early as the work of the French linguist Antoine Meillet (1905). An art historian's specialized terminology for discussing images is not merely an example of an elitist practicing linguistic mystification with the intent of isolating nonspecialists from an appreciation of these images. As Meillet noted, this attempt is to "affirm all the better his solidarity with his group by differentiating himself from the total society (p. 1016)."

Although Berger briefly raises the issue of political control through linguistic means that Basil Bernstein and others have singled out, it is not *merely* control which is at issue here. The function and use of language and speech by different speech communities in regard to specified domains of activity should also be mentioned. Do art critics talk and write about images in a "mystifying" way because it is their intention to maintain control over a tradition of exclusivity in a field? Or is it perhaps the case that a particular language lacks the adequate or appropriate situations or means in which the "many" could talk about images? Berger alludes to this issue but does not pursue it.

His work is weakest when he attempts to show how "ways of seeing" displayed in oil paintings are really mock-ups of a stratified social order. It is, to Berger, an order in which these images reflect the mores and values of an acquisitive and gender-structured culture. Canvas and pigments are deployed as mirrors for those who control the creation and distribution of images.

His argument that "a way of seeing the world, which was ultimately determined by new attitudes to property and exchange, found its visual expression in the oil painting, and could not have found it in any other visual art form" is cleverly displayed in the color film. A restless moving camera isolates and highlights Berger's point, insinuating itself into framed images of mutton, lobsters, jewels, and so on. Deviations from this materialist obsession are explained by using light-headed quantitative jargon. The landscapes of Ruysdael, Constable, and others, which contradict his painting-as-possession argument, are written off as rare exceptions to the dominant trends. No data, however, are supplied to bolster this appealing argument.

The direct link Berger sees between the "advertisements for one's self" in oil paintings and its lineal heirs in the world of advertising is intriguing. In an argument similar to Gerbner's notions (1972) about the monolithic thrust of television's message system, Berger notes, "... publicity as a system only makes a single proposal," that we transform ourselves into more desirable human beings by consuming material goods. The transformation attains for us the state of grace and glamour in which the creatures of advertising images seemingly dwell. For Berger, "The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour. And publicity is the process of manufacturing glamour (p. 131)." He adds, "Glamour is a modern invention. In the heyday of the oil painting it did not exist. Ideas of grace, elegance, authority amounted to something apparently similar but fundamentally different (p. 146)."

Berger might reacquaint himself with Charles Dickens, particularly the Dickens of *Bleak House*, which is set in the early nineteenth century. This is also the era of the Gainsborough portrait of Mrs. Siddons, which Berger assures us is very different from an advertising image. An intriguing parallel might be drawn between Dickens' dissection of "the world of fashionable intelligence" and today's world of advertising. Dickens notes:

It is not a large world. Relatively even to this world of ours, which has its limits too . . . it is a very little speck. There is much good in it; there are many good and true people in it; it has its appointed place. But the evil of it is that it is a world wrapped up in too much jeweller's cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle round the sun. It is a deadened world, and its growth is sometimes unhealthy for want of air. [1964:23-24]

Thus, in Dickens' description of the fashionable Lady Dedlock and her Gainsborough-like world of fashionable people, one catches glimpses of a criticism of the then dominant cultural standards of glamour and envy which Berger has assured us did not exist until the social matrices that gave rise to an age of mechanical reproduction made them possible. One has a disquieting feeling that either woman (Lady Dedlock or Mrs. Siddons) is not unlike that mannequin *par excellence* Jean Shrimpton, an object of envy to all who aspire to the kind of hyperrealized "world" created by the machinery of contemporary publicity.

Berger aims for the broad generalization. In his statements on the various "ways of seeing" advertising images display, he attends particularly to notions of gender and social order. However, Goffman is much more to the point regarding "commercial pictures" in ads when he notes that "... this sort of representation pertains to pictures as such and doesn't tell us what we very often want to know, namely, what aspects of real life pictures provide us a fair image of, and what social effect commercial picturing has upon the life that is purportedly pictured (p. 92)." Berger exercises no such caution, preferring polemics and politics to close perusal. Rather than realizing that, as Goffman notes, "If anything,

advertisers conventionalize our conventions, stylize what is already stylization . . . their hype is hyper-ritualization (p. 145)," Berger prefers to see publicity as no less than "the life of this culture," which, in the case of capitalism, defines its own interests through advertising as cannily and narrowly as possible. For Goffman, what can be studied as a special slice of a culture writ large is for Berger the scrawlings of a ruling class which dictates and exploits the deferred dreams of the powerless recipients of these powerful images.

Berger's own mode of "stylization" in the fourth film (concerned mainly with the images of publicity) is as slippery as that selfsame code he reviles in the hands of advertisers. His choice of a wide-angle lens to make a museum appear to be a forbidding place (replete with prowling German shepherd dog), or his use of what becomes an ominous silence and decelerated camera speed to show one the bleak vistas and images amidst which today's people wander zombie-like, would make the denizens of Madison Avenue proud indeed. In doing this, perhaps unintentionally, Berger tells us much about the power and breadth of those tacit conventions of visual depiction that constitute the very air of the culture in which both he and the public he would like to save dwell.

In the final view, Berger's aim—to make one aware of the political ramifications of the rise of an omnipresent "language of images" brought about by increased sophistication in the varying modes of mechanical reproduction and distribution—is much needed as a complementary and antagonistic perspective beside traditional "formalist" or "historical" analyses. However, his acute lack of perception into his backstage media manipulations, necessary for the production of his "way of seeing," severely hampers his desired generalist approach.

Sol Worth, in a provocative paper, noted:

The question of whether those who use signs, in any mode or medium, are using them as social devices, assuming social conventions and rules about their use, seems to me to be a central issue in (ethnographic) semiotic method. It is not always the case that sign use or behavior fits into a social matrix, but it is always necessary for students of sign use to know whether or not we are dealing with a social matrix. [1978]

For Berger, a "social matrix" appears to be something as heterogeneous, insubstantial, and abstract as the "mass" Kierkegaard discovered persons employ as a cover term for an inability to define the specific parameters of a proposition. Berger would like to substitute that wonderful umbrella term "the world view" for the more problematic, but ultimately more rewarding, tasks of specific description and investigation within a certain universe of images and image users, makers, and interpreters. A world view is more than a *pro forma* acknowledgment that persons with a cultural tradition other than that of which Berger is a member exist amidst a "language of images." Like the men represented in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, Berger surveys a domain from his private map, his unre-

flexive way of seeing. In the end, the four films and the book are a series of fascinating propinquitous complaints, which, in toto, do not produce much substance for researchable topics in the study of the role and function of mass-produced images for a given culture. They are, however, useful as introductory materials which at times clearly and provocatively illuminate the political use of images in a culture as yet another facet of investigating meaning in visual images. For this, we should be grateful to Berger.

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